

Editorial

**By Myriam Sfeir, Executive Director, The Arab Institute for Women (AiW),
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In 2023, the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) at the Lebanese American University (LAU) celebrated, with great honor, its 50th anniversary. This milestone has offered each member of our team, both current and former, a moment of deep reflection of our past, taking pride in who we are as we take a bold step forward and dare to do more.

In 2024, LAU celebrated its centennial. LAU grew from a girls' school established in 1835 by Presbyterian missionaries. In the early 20th century, as post-secondary women's education began to take hold, our esteemed institution was at the forefront. Under the leadership of founding President Frances Irwin, the college started a two-year junior college curriculum in 1924 that was then mandatory for young women wishing to pursue their bachelor's degrees. Female students flocked from all over the Arab region to join the program.

If we are to be true to our history, we cannot but pay tribute to the pioneer women who worked relentlessly at the College and were at its helm. LAU has had seven female presidents – including acting presidents – long before other leading educational institutions in Europe and North America. In 1973, when the institution started accepting men, The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) – now the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) – was founded to honor the college's unique heritage as the first educational institution for women in the Arab region. At the time, it was one of the world's first university-affiliated institutes to work exclusively on women's rights and gender equality.

Over the past five decades, the AiW has capitalized on LAU's legacy of education, empowerment, and equality by acting as a bridge, a hub, and a voice for women in the region. I have had the privilege of working with all the visionary and inspirational women who built up the institute, starting with the AiW's founder Dr. Julinda Abul Nasr, a woman who valued education and equality above everything else. Her work has been honored at the Riyad Nassar Library here at LAU through the Julinda Abul Nasr Women and Gender collection, a special collection of books dedicated to women's and gender studies. In doing so, we not only honor her legacy but also ensure that every future generation will know her name, her contributions to the Institute and LAU, and to the women's movement in general.

Since its inception, the AiW has been at the forefront of bridging academia and activism through research, policy, education, publications, and advocacy, bringing together scholars, researchers, policymakers, and students to take part in vital debates concerning gender equality and women's rights. This collaborative model generates research and work that has the power to break social taboos and encourage creative thinking. In addition, the AiW's work focuses on incorporating community activists, women change makers, and human rights defenders from all walks of life to ensure local and regional communities are invested and engaged in the fight for gender equality and women's rights over the long term. As an independent convenor, the AiW is a vibrant space open to new ideas and people, transcending sect, age, and race. In this way, we can effect change to promote gender equality and women's rights.

Drawing on more than 50 years of experience and high-quality research, the Institute has been at the frontline of the feminist movement. Today, the AiW continues to join forces with local feminist organizations to work for a feminist future. We know that the youth are the key to our future, especially if we hope to build a feminist and egalitarian society where all people can live with dignity. We must encourage and support them to claim it and put their visions for equality and dignity into practice. Through our work with students and youth members of the larger community here in Lebanon, we aim to do just that.

While we celebrate our legacy, it is essential to acknowledge the AiW's most significant publication: *Al-Raida*. Since its establishment in 1976, *Al-Raida* has served as a vital platform for knowledge production and dissemination *by and about* women in Lebanon and the Arab region. Over nearly five decades, it has documented the social, political, and cultural transformations of the region—both positive and negative—while amplifying pioneering research and fostering critical, and often challenging, conversations that bridge theory and practice. Each issue of *Al-Raida* reveals new narratives, not only chronicling progress but also inspiring it. As one of the few publications that effectively connects academia and activism, *Al-Raida* remains freely accessible online to scholars and practitioners in Lebanon and across the Arab region, continuing to galvanize gender-related research and discourse among academics, activists, and students alike.

With this commemorative issue, *Al-Raida* has been fully revamped for the third time in its history. Given that this issue marks the transition between two 50-year eras, the redesigning has been aimed at modernizing the journal's appearance, including its sections, color scheme, and layout, to ensure a new and appealing presentation of information. We greatly believe that this transformation honors our legacy while, at the same time, embraces innovation, ensuring that *Al-Raida* continues to inspire, inform, and lead for more and more decades to come.

As we celebrate 50 years of work at the intersection of activism and academia, this special issue compiles some of the most significant outputs produced by the Institute and highlights the historical contributions of pioneering women in Lebanon and the Arab region. Across a little more than 100 pages, it presents seminal contributions that reflect the Institute's long-standing commitment to advancing gender equality, fostering research excellence, and amplifying women's voices across disciplines and generations. It revisits key debates that have shaped modern feminist thought, while introducing even newer perspectives that challenge convention and spark transformative discussions. Indeed, this issue offers both a tribute to the past and a vision for the future of women and positive social change.

At the AiW, we remain steadfast in our commitment to serving as a catalyst for those engaged in the pursuit of gender equality and women's rights. We are and will continue to be a center of power for women and girls, gender minorities, single mothers, women migrants and refugees, and anyone else faced with gender discrimination. We see ourselves as a source of information, a hub for inspiration, a leader, and a galvanizer. Our experience demonstrates that even a small academic institution can play a transformative role in advancing gender justice. This progress, however, would not have been possible without the unwavering support and dedication of our administration, faculty, staff, donors, and students.

We extend our sincere gratitude to UNDP, UN Women, and the Government of Canada for their partnership, advocacy, and belief in our mission. As we celebrate our 50th anniversary, we reaffirm our commitment to advancing equality and pledge to continue collaborating with all those willing to challenge boundaries and sustain the struggle for gender justice in these complex and demanding times.